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## THE CLOSE OF THE *ODYSSEY*

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No part of Homer has been rejected with such general unanimity as the closing scenes of the *Odyssey*. The scholiast to  $\psi$  296 says that according to Aristophanes and Aristarchus this is the  $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$  of the *Odyssey*. This word has generally been accepted as meaning the end, the conclusion of the poem, while Roemer and his school think that  $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$  means, not the conclusion, but the goal or consummation toward which all the action tends. The verse thus marked is the one which ends the recognition scene between the husband and wife and tells how they retired alone to the old bridal couch.

It is hard to speak with assurance in regard to the beliefs of Aristarchus, since we must rely for the most part, on obscure or untrustworthy sources, and Roemer in his great work has tried to reverse most of the previously accepted doctrines of the great Alexandrian on the ground of the ignorance or dishonesty of his transcribers.

When I first read this explanation, namely, that Aristarchus regarded the return of Odysseus to the bed of his wife as the goal, not the conclusion of the *Odyssey*, I regarded it as an easy solution of a perplexing problem, but many re-readings of the poem itself have convinced me that this scene is neither the conclusion nor the goal of the *Odyssey*.

No doubt in a modern novel or play this scene would be both the goal and the conclusion, so that Stephen Phillips closes his play at this very spot and the curtain goes down as Penelope falls into the arms of her husband. All through this play of Stephen Phillips, love for Penelope is the compelling force which drives the hero on, and when he goes to Hades it is for tidings of his wife:

A living man I come  
Amid the dead for tidings of my wife,  
Penelope. Doth she hold true to me?

When he meets the shade of Agamemnon he is warned to put no trust in women, but his only reply is:

Penelope! I'll kiss thee and fear not.

On meeting the shade of his mother his first words are a passionate inquiry in regard to his wife, and when he is told that she still lives and holds true to him, Phillips makes Odysseus exclaim:

At last, at last the word that lighteth hell,  
One word! and thou alone, mother, couldst speak it!  
Thy voice alone: thine out of all the dead!

The hero then rushes back toward earth shouting,

She lives, and she is true to me.  
But she hath need of me! Up to the earth!  
Faint not, Penelope: faint not, endure!

This is the motive of the entire drama, so that when Odysseus is once more safely at home with his wife the goal and end have been reached. This is modern, where love is the supreme dramatic and literary passion, but it is not Homeric. One must read the *Odyssey* carefully, having this one particular point in mind, to appreciate how small a part Penelope had in Odysseus' homesickness or in his yearnings for Ithaca.

One year of his absence was spent with Circe, and he seemed so willing to remain with her that he could be induced to leave only by the repeated efforts of his companions, and soon after leaving her he was taken up by the goddess Calypso, with whom he spent seven years, during most of which he was evidently highly pleased with her, as the phrase ε 153, *ἐπεὶ οὐκέτι ἦνδανε νόμῳ*, clearly implies. Homer was too shrewd an artist to permit his hero to spend many happy years with Circe and Calypso and then to have him burst forth with,

My wife, my wife, she's true to me!

The Greeks may have had a double standard of morals, but they were never lost in absurdity.

Homer, neither in the words of Odysseus nor otherwise, represents Odysseus as eager to see his wife for her own sake or for her society. It is his home, his estate, his servants, his son, his father,

which are the objects of his desire. The first reference to his homesickness is in the first book where it is said, "Odysseus longing to see even the smoke arising from his native land desires to die."

When the gods assemble in Book v, Zeus says, "It is fated for him to see his friends and to come to his high-roofed home and his native land." Calypso taunts him with a longing for his wife and then compares her own charms with those of Penelope, to which he replies, "I know that she cannot compare with thee, but even so, I am eager to go homeward and to see the day of my return."

After imploring Alcinous to send him on his way he says, "I shall gladly die, if I only can see my estate, my servants, and my great high-roofed palace." To us moderns the omission here of any reference to Penelope seems almost brutal.

When the hero has told his name and his country to the assembled Phaeacians, he narrates the efforts which have been vainly made to detain him, adding, "They could not persuade the heart in my breast, since nothing is more pleasing than one's native land and one's parents."

On meeting the shade of his mother in Hades he says, "Tell me of my father and tell me of my son whom I left behind; is my property still with them, or have others taken it, and do they say I will no more return? Then tell me of the plans and purposes of my wife; does she remain with my son and does she guard well all of my property?" Here is the first reference Odysseus has made to his wife, but there is no interest in her welfare; she is merely the guardian of his son and of his property. He is as little concerned about her for her own sake as if she had been his dog, Argus.

On leaving the Phaeacians and in the presence of the Phaeacian queen, Arete, he prays that he may find his blameless wife and uninjured friends safe at home. The word with which he refers to his wife is cold and dignified, being the very word which was used in an earlier book to describe the adulterer, Aegisthus, ἀμύμων. It is hard to find a word more divested of all affection or passion than this word, yet this is the one passage in which he shows any interest in his wife.

When Odysseus returns to Ithaca and talks with Athena he does not in any way refer to his wife nor ask anything about her.

He offers a prayer to the nymphs as follows: "If Athena permits me to live and spares my son, then will I bring gifts to your altar." When Odysseus is alone with his son in the cabin of the swineherd, he plans how he may take vengeance on the suitors, asks all about Laertes, but not one word in regard to Penelope herself. No poet has ever shown greater skill in turning the attention of the hearer toward the great scenes of the poem. How carefully we are prepared for the first appearance of Odysseus! How slowly and how skilfully the Phaeacians are made ready to accept the unknown stranger as the great Trojan hero, Odysseus!

The same genius is shown in the *Iliad*, where book after book is centered on the approaching death of Hector at the hand of Achilles, and then many hundred verses prepare for the return and burial of the body of Hector.

It is beyond belief that the meeting of Odysseus and Penelope should be the goal of the poem and the poet should have taken no pains to picture in the hero an eagerness for that meeting.

A second reason for doubting that this is the close of the *Odyssey* is the fact that the poet loves to move in the crowd; most of his great scenes are on a crowded stage or before a great audience. The *Iliad* opens in the presence of the Greek army; it closes before the assembled Trojans. The *Odyssey* begins with the gods gathered in Olympus, then it moves to the crowded palace of Odysseus, then to the assembly of the men of Ithaca, then it moves to Pylos, where 4,500 men are met to sacrifice. No attention is paid to this multitude; they are there when we arrive, and they vanish with no notice of their departure.

When Telemachus and his companion arrive at Sparta they find a wedding-feast, but the guests suddenly vanish and there is only a small group where there had just been a throng of feasters and revelers. This is the great example of "Homeric nodding," since the poet seems to have forgotten that Telemachus arrived at a feast. However, the crowd at Pylos and the gathering here are due to a higher poetic necessity, namely, the necessity of action in the presence of a crowd.

In the presence of the Phaeacians, the same throngs, the games, the feasts, all are crowded. In Ithaca Odysseus is for a short time

in the hut of the swineherd, but he soon returns to the palace, the suitors, and the crowd. A simple scene with but two actors and no spectators is no fitting close for an epic which loves to move on a crowded stage. The goal of the *Odyssey* is not to tell how an absent and truant husband has joined again with his faithful wife, but how a king returned to his distracted and ungoverned kingdom, how he destroyed the spoilers of his goods, how their death was unavenged, and how he once more became the ruler of a united people.

Two matters for which the poet makes careful preparation are still undecided when Odysseus and his wife retire to their chamber: first, will the suitors die unavenged, and secondly, what will Laertes do when he learns of his son's return?

Near the beginning of the poem Telemachus complains that the suitors consume unpunished his possessions, but if Zeus would only grant him the power of requital, then the suitors would perish unavenged. In the second book before the assembly of the Ithacans a like prayer is made that the suitors may perish with an unrequited death.

This matter of requital for the death of one's kinsmen may lie lightly on the modern mind, but it was the very essence of Greek thinking. This desire for revenge was what prompted Odysseus to the great folly of telling his true name to the Cyclops, since it was only by the fact that the Cyclops knew who had blinded him that Odysseus could avenge the death of his companions, inasmuch as a wound from an unknown hand brought no true vengeance.

How keen the sense of the necessity for vengeance for the death of kindred or companions was is shown by the answer Odysseus gives to Circe when told that Scylla will seize and slay six of his companions, for he immediately asks, "How can I avenge the death of my companions, when Scylla has destroyed them?" ( $\mu$  113). It was not so much the death of his companions that galled him as the fact that he could not avenge them.

When Odysseus plans with Athena in Book xx he tells the goddess that he is not so much concerned with the death of the suitors as that he should escape punishment for their slaughter, and that their death should be unavenged, to which she replies, "If

fifty ambushes of enemies should assail thee, I am strong enough to protect thee from them all" (v 42).

In Book xxiii Odysseus expresses indifference whether his wife knows him or not, and says to his son, "Let us consider this, for any man slaying but a single person flees, leaving kindred and native land, but we have slain the support of the state, the leaders of Ithaca. What shall we do?" ( $\psi$  117).

If the *Odyssey* ends with the scene between Odysseus and Penelope, then the real question, Shall the suitors be avenged? a question inherent in Greek nature and especially in the nature of Odysseus, is left unanswered. It is not enough to say that the poet of the last book later changed the *Odyssey* so as to bring in the answer, since every Greek would have asked that question, even if the poet had not.

The second question, the question in regard to the aged Laertes, is also unanswered except in Book xxiv. Almost at the opening of the *Odyssey* we have a long account of the sad condition of Laertes, living apart in grief and in wretchedness. Again in Book ii there is another account of Laertes and the shroud Penelope is weaving for him. These two first books are introductory and they present in brief space the actors who are to play a part in the scenes of the poem. It seems highly unlikely that so much space would be given to the description of Laertes if he were not to appear in the course of the poem in his own person.

Menelaus in Book iv speaks tenderly of the sorrows of the aged Laertes and how he must mourn the absence of his son. As soon as Penelope learns of the absence of Telemachus and the attempt of the suitors to slay him, she plans to send for the advice of Laertes, but Eurycleia begs her to spare the old man in his misery. When Odysseus meets the shade of his mother, his first words are, "Tell me of my father!" A long account then follows of the bitter condition of Laertes, deprived of both son and wife: "There on a bed of leaves he lies in summer, and in winter in the ash near the fire, always in sorrow yearning for his son's return" ( $\lambda$  190).

When the disguised Odysseus talks with Eumaeus, although he asks no word in regard to Penelope, he says, "Tell me of the father of Odysseus, is he still alive?" (o 347). Then follows another

account of the wretched and heartbroken condition of the poor old man, a description repeated in other words and with other details in Book xvi.

The poet of the *Odyssey* from the very start began to arouse interest for Laertes and prepared the hearer to expect that the son and the father would meet in just such a scene as that found near the close of the last book of the *Odyssey*. The respect for age and for fathers was too strong among the Greeks for the poet to leave out of the plan of the *Odyssey* this recognition scene.

Another reason for thinking that the *Odyssey* never closed with the scene between Odysseus and Penelope is that it would destroy that balance, that proportion, which is so essential a part of Greek art and of Greek literature.

In the first book of the *Iliad* the plague lasts for nine days, the gods go to the Aethiopians, Achilles increases his anger, and on the twenty-first day the gods return when Thetis goes to Olympus to supplicate Zeus to honor her son. These numbers are repeated in the last book of the *Iliad*. Not only does this book cover twenty-one days, but the days are divided into nine and twelve exactly as in the first book. Here, too, Achilles spends a like number of days in anger, here he is visited by his mother, and here she also goes to Olympus to talk with Zeus. Book i opens in the presence of the hosts of the Achaeans, and the *Iliad* closes in the presence of the hosts of the Trojans, so that there is a balance, not only in time and in events, but in the setting as well.

This law of balance or harmony reappears in all forms of Greek art as well as in the odes of Pindar and the choruses of the drama.

It is contrary to every feeling of Greek art that Homer should have begun the *Odyssey* with the gods all present at Olympus, save only Poseidon, and then ended the poem with a scene in which there are but two actors and no audience.

The present close of the *Odyssey*, as we have it in Book xxiv, balances or corresponds with every scene in the introduction. The *Odyssey* is set in motion by the agency of Athena, it is closed by the same agency. In Book i she hurries to Ithaca at the command of Zeus in order to arouse the son to action, and by the same command of the same god at the close she hurries back to Ithaca to bring peace



to the island. Nearly every actor is named or presented in the beginning and they nearly all appear to make their final bow at the close; the suitors are dead, but are represented by their kinsmen.

No Pindaric ode shows greater harmony, and no pediment in any Greek temple shows a more perfect balance than this; the same characters and the same groupings reappear in the close which were present at the opening. The poem in interest and in art has reached its conclusion, this is at once the end and the goal of the *Odyssey*.

The scene between Penelope and Odysseus is not the conclusion of the *Odyssey* for five reasons, at least:

First, Odysseus' yearnings are not so much for his wife as for the re-establishment of his power in his own kingdom.

Secondly, Homer loves to move in the throng and often violates other principles so as to keep his scenes crowded with people; hence, he would hardly close his poem with a scene in which there were but two actors and no spectators.

Thirdly, the question asked in many places of the *Odyssey* is this: Are the suitors to die unavenged? This seems to me to be the pivot on which the action of the poem revolves and the point of chief interest for a Greek. This question is not answered until the end of the present *Odyssey*.

Fourthly, the attention is called again and again to the heart-broken condition of Laertes, and his eagerness to see his son—eagerness fully reciprocated by the hero, Odysseus. Laertes could hardly have been made so prominent and our sympathies could never have been so stirred, if he were never to appear in the action of the poem and he does not appear except in Book xxiv.

Fifthly, balance and reciprocal grouping are the essence of the Greek spirit as it showed itself in Greek art and in Greek literature; hence it seems incredible that the *Odyssey* should have opened with a crowded scene and closed with a scene in which there are only two, but no Greek pediment, no Greek ode, shows a more artistic balance both in numbers and in grouping than the balance existing between the introduction and the present close of the *Odyssey*. In the traditional close of the *Odyssey* every condition of the poem, of art and of interest, has been met and satisfied; the

stage is crowded; in the background are the swineherd and neatherd, the prophet, the bard, the herald, and the faithful men of Ithaca; close by is the aged father, while right in front and at the center are the three great actors of the epic, Telemachus, Odysseus, and Athena; the tale has been told, the actors have made their bow, the *Odyssey* is ended.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The problems of language are not touched in the foregoing article, since they have been handled by Dr. Shewan, *Classical Philology*, IX, 35 ff. and 160 ff. No scholar of this generation possesses a deeper and a sounder knowledge of Homer and no one is less inclined to substitute a hypothesis for a fact.